

Stranger Things 2: A Novelization by DaisyDaze111

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Summary: This is the sequel novelization of Stranger Things. I do not own the characters, settings or plot lines. Once again, the dialogue and plots will all be the same, but I have added inner thought and descriptions to enhance the story. I tried to remain true to the character development and traits the Duffer Brothers created. Hope you enjoy!

1. Prologue

Prologue

October 28, 1984 - Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Few stars were visible over the skyscrapers of downtown Pittsburgh. Below on the roads street lights lit the walkways where people idled as a car passed every few minutes. Car horns blared throughout the city, but otherwise the night was quiet and uneventful. On a dimly lit road a dingy conversion van sat parked directly before a tall building along the right-hand curb. The driver inside wore a mask featuring some animal. The driver turned a full head of afro hair to the building on the right as the ringing of alarms sounded from inside. Four people, with faces covered by masks like their driver, sped out from the buildings entrance and ran down the steps to the sidewalk.

"Go! Go! Go! Go! Go! Move it!" ordered one of the masked men who sported a Mohawk haircut with his hair arranged in spikes.

A woman's voice shouted from behind her mask, "Let's get out of here!"

The masked people climbed into the side of the van, hearing police sirens quickly approaching. After they were all inside, the Mohawked man slid the door shut with a bang, the curtains in the van's windows jostling. The tires squealed in protest as the vehicle lurched forward and swung around so that they drove on the right of the road in the opposite direction.

A police car raced in from a neighboring street, made a hasty u-turn and followed the van at full speed, their emergency lights flashing blue across the parked cars and buildings. A car coming onto the street from an adjacent alley jerked to a stop and the cop car swerved around them.

Inside the cab the officer transmitted over his radio, "Headed down Poplar, toward Main."

The van took a sudden right which the officer copied immediately,

struggling to keep the car steady as he picked up speed and dodged around other drivers.

In the van, the criminals each removed their masks, including the driver who grunted in agitation as she threw her mask to the floorboards and placed her hand back on the wheel. Each of them wore concerned expressions, some with blatant panic, but the young woman sitting beside the driver removed her mask calmly and stared steadily at the road before her.

"Get'em off of us, Mick!" the Mohawked man yelled to the driver.

"I'm working on it!" she shouted back, and with that statement she slammed her foot onto the gas pedal, flooring it. The engine whirred with force and the van sped up.

"The alley. To your right," said the young woman riding passenger beside Mick.

"Okay!" answered Mick and without question she spun the van around the corner to her right.

The squad car pursuing them made to follow, but the officer had to slam on his breaks as a civilian's car blocked his way.

"Shit!" he yelled out in frustration banging his fist on his steering wheel.

Mick faced her own difficulties with the sudden turn as she found herself staring down into the bright headlights of an oncoming car.

"Shit! Shit! Shit!"

She jerked the wheel to the right and drove on the sidewalk to avoid collision. The van hit a huge pile of trash and one of the fugitives in the backseat cackled with excitement and adrenaline. They sped down the alley coming out onto a dark street where there were no cops in sight.

"Okay, okay," Mick whispered to herself as she exhaled in relief.

The Mohawked man turned to stare out the back windows in time to

see several squad cars, with flashing blue lights and sirens wailing, speed onto their street from either corner.

"Son of a bitch!" he swore. "We got more!"

"Oh, shit!" screamed Mick.

In the cop car, the lead driver informed over the radio. "They're headed down seventh!"

"Do something, Kali! Do something!" the Mohawked man yelled at the girl sitting beside Mick.

"Next right." said Kali turning to Mick. "There's a tunnel. Take it."

Again Mick nodded without question and when they reached the street Kali had indicated, she made the turn. The police followed them, the driver announcing to his partner excitedly, "We got those bastards now!"

With that the officer slammed his foot onto the gas pedal forcing the car to speed up.

Mick drove straight down the road, nervously waiting for more instructions as they approached the tunnel. The passengers in the back of the van watched anxiously as the police drew nearer and nearer. Kali however, closed her eyes and brought her right hand up before her, forming a fist. Then, she muttered, "Boom."

The cop following them watched as the van drove straight into the tunnel and he kept his foot on the gas knowing they could never outrun his sleek cruiser. Without warning the tunnel suddenly collapsed right over where the van had just passed and the officer jerked the steering wheel and slammed his foot on the brake.

"Holy shit!" he exclaimed.

His sudden stop to avoid the disaster caused a pile up as all the other officers in pursuit braked and swerved to miss him. His unit was rammed from behind and his body was propelled forward.

"Shit! Whoa! Whoa! Whoa!" he screamed.

The unit came to a rest and the sirens blared before dying out as the passenger side officer turned them off to assess what had just happened. He turned to his partner and shouted at him.

"What the hell is wrong with you, Adams? The hell are you doing?"

Officer Adams stared blankly at his partner, but there was a ringing in his ears, and he could not make sense of the words being shouted at him.

"Adams! Come on! What the hell? Why'd you stop?" the officer yelled at his dazed partner. "Adams! Adams! Adams, I'm talking to you!"

Adams struggled to reach for the handle of his car door. As it opened he stumbled onto the ground before pulling himself upright, his partner still calling him from the other side of the car. The young officer stood straight up, feeling wobbly on his feet, and stared at the collapsed tunnel before him. However, his incredulous eyes saw only a tunnel that stood whole and undamaged. It made no sense to him.

At the opposite end of the tunnel, the getaway van continued onto the open road before them. The passengers riding backseat clapped and cheered their victorious escape from the police. Beside Mick, Kali stared straight ahead. She did not cheer or clap nor did she smile or exhale in relief. Instead, she simply raised the back of her gloved hand and wiped away a stream of blood dripping from her nose. On the exposed skin of her wrist was a small tattoo of the number '008'.

2. Chapter 1 - MADMAX

Chapter 1 - MADMAX

Halloween tombstones decorated the yard of a small home in Hawkins, Indiana. The apparitions contained lightbulbs within so that they glowed orange in the darkness of the night. They featured ghosts, skeletons and pumpkins and even the phrase 'trick-or-treat'. In the sitting room of the neat home Dustin Henderson swore loudly.

"Son of a bitch! Son of a bitch!"

He tossed the cushions of the couch he had been searching through aside, leaving them in a jumbled mess as he darted into the living room where his mother sat watching the nightly news, a purring cat nestled in her arms. Dustin removed the cushions from the sofa as the news reporter informed the viewership.

"A police chase rocked downtown Pittsburgh earlier this evening..."

"Another stupid penny!" Dustin groaned throwing the unwanted penny he had found in the creases of the sofa across the room.

"Dusty, watch it!" his mother whined. "You almost hit Mews."

"Can I please check under your cushion?" he asked her.

"Dusty!" she moaned.

"Mom please? It's an emergency!"

She moaned dramatically, which he mimicked, as she stood from her rocking chair patting Mews. Dustin rushed forward to look beneath the cushion.

"Who's your budda? Who's your budda? Budda, budda," Mrs. Henderson cooed to her cat.

With a wide grin Dustin held up a round coin pulled from the depths of the chair.

"Love you, Mom," he told her gratefully as he ran back to his room. He grabbed up his radio and transmitted, "Lucas? Lucas, you copy? I've got four quarters. What's your haul?"

Lucas retrieved his radio, a bath towel slung over his sweaty shoulder, and replied, "Take your puny haul and multiply it by five."

"How?" Dustin asked incredulously.

"While you were scrounging around like a homeless bum," Lucas answered. "I mowed Old Man Humphrey's lawn."

"Old Man Humphrey's got that kinda cash?"

"Just call Mike already."

"You call Mike."

Lucas shook his head. "I have to go take a shower from doing real work, like a man. Over and out."

At the Wheeler's home no Halloween decorations had been put up, but a Reagan and Bush campaign sign was posted in the lawn for the coming election. Dustin's voice came over Mike's *Supercomm* as he sat in the tent he had built the year before in his family's basement.

"Mike, do you copy? Mike, do you copy?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I copy?" Mike answered with a guilty start.

Rather than relief at the prompt response, Dustin griped, "What the hell are you doing on this channel?"

"Nothing," Mike told him.

"Well, Lucas and I have six bucks total. What's your haul?"

A look of horror came over Mike's face. "S-shit! I don't know yet."

"What do you mean you don't know yet?"

"Just hold on! Call Will."

Mike shoved the antenna of his walkie-talkie down and jumped to his feet. Seconds later he was digging through drawers of underclothing in pastel colors. He saw something pink and yanked it out but saw it was only a dress slip. Shoving it back into the drawer he opened the next one, which contained darker outerwear. Buried beneath the clothes he found a pink piggy bank with the name 'Nancy' painted over the side in black letters. Strolling to the bed in the center of his sister's room, he pulled out the cork from the bottom of the bank and shook the container, emptying the contents onto Nancy's bedsheets. Mike, watching the quarters tumble out of the porcelain pig, failed to notice Nancy push open the door to her bedroom.

"What the hell are you doing?" she shouted.

Mike spun around and gaped at her then yelled, "I'll pay you back!"

He grabbed two fistfuls of quarters, shoved them into his pockets and dashed past her with a quick, "Bye!"

He ran before she could snatch him to pull him back, and when he got to the stairs he used the rails to propel him down the stairs, jumping past the steps, and landing on his feet.

Nancy thundered after him, hollering, "Mike! Mike! Get back here!"

As his children stormed past him, Ted called out, "Hey. No running in the house."

Karen looked up from beside Holly, who stood on a chair helping her mother with dinner, and yelled to Mike and Nancy, "What is going on?"

Neither sibling answered their parents as they ran into the yard.

"Mike! Mike!" Nancy screamed, but Mike climbed onto his bike and paddled away so that all she could do was watch his receding back. "Asshole!"

Mike did not give a backward glance and Nancy threw up her arms and let them fall to her sides in defeat.

It was a noisy scene at the local arcade store, with young people coming and going. Mike, Dustin, and Lucas rolled their bikes through the parking lot. They stored their bikes into the bike racks, then glanced up when they heard a car horn. They waved in greeting at Will Byers and his mother, Joyce.

"Hey!" they called.

Before Will could climb out of the car Joyce told him, "Okay. So I'll pick you up in two hours. That's nine o'clock on the dot, okay?"

"Okay. Okay," Will nodded.

"If anything happens, if you need to come home, just ask them to use their phone and call home. Okay? Don't-"

"Don't walk or bike home. I know. I know," he said impatiently, anxious to join his friends. He opened the passenger door, but before he had exited the vehicle Joyce called him back.

"Okay but sweetie."

"Mom, I have to go," he griped.

"Have fun."

With a smile Will climbed out and closed the door. He gave his mother one more glance then ran off toward the arcade entrance, Joyce watching him anxiously until she could no longer see him.

Several minutes later, the boys stood before an arcade game called *Dragon's Lair*, in which an animated woman with blonde hair, heavily shadowed eyes, and a provocative, sparkling black dress informed them in a sugary voice, "To slay the dragon, use the magic sword."

"Oh, Jesus! I'm in uncharted territory here, guys," Dustin fretted over the game controls.

"Down! Down! Down!" ordered Mike, Will, and Lucas as they watched anxiously.

Maneuvering the toggle Dustin shouted back, "I'm going! I'm going!"

The cartoon knight ducked on the screen before dodging the claws of a large dragon. A spurt of fire flew out of the beast's mouth and the provocative woman exclaimed dramatically. The knight ran across the screen and Mike, Lucas and Will cheered Dustin on.

"I'm going! I'm going! I'm going!" Dustin chanted.

The knight arrived beside a boulder containing the aforementioned sword.

Growing anxious over his friends' shouts, Dustin yelled back, "Okay. Shut up. Shut up. Shut up!"

Unfortunately, despite pressing the button several times, the knight had just barely lifted the sword when he was engulfed by flames. The boys gasped and Dustin cried out as the character became a pile of bones.

"No. No. No! No! No! No! I hate this overpriced bullshit! Son of a bitch! Piece of shit!" Dustin hollered, punctuating his rage by hitting and kicking the machine.

"You're just not nimble enough," Lucas said smugly. "But you'll get there one day. But until then, Princess Daphne is still mine."

Lucas chuckled in his gloat and Dustin replied, "You know, whatever. I'm still tops on *Centipede* and *Dig Dug*."

"You sure about that?"

The boys glanced over to see a slovenly, pimpled teen named Keith watching them as he shoved cheese puffs into his mouth.

"Sure about what?" Dustin questioned him.

Keith merely gazed at him in amusement, and a look of horror crossed Dustin's face. Shoving past Will, he darted through the arcade.

"You're kidding me. No. No. No. Move. Move!" he pushed through the crowd as he searched for *Dig Dug*. "No, no, no, no, no. Hey, no! No! No!"

Dustin despaired as he read the list of champions the *Dig Dug* screen, his name reading as second place with a total of 650,990 points. Will's eyes traveled up to the point total above Dustin's.

"751, 300 points!" he exclaimed.

Mike shook his head in disbelief. "That's impossible."

Dustin read the name to see who had taken over his first place position then turned to Keith, asking, "Who's Mad Max?"

"Better than you," came the reply. Dustin glared at him and flipped him his middle finger.

"Is it you?" asked Will.

Keith scoffed. "You know I despise *Dig Dug*."

"Then, who is it?" inquired Lucas.

"Yeah, spill it, Keith," Dustin ordered.

"You want information, then I need something in return," he glanced at Mike, giving him a sly grin as he popped another cheese puff into his mouth.

Dustin turned a pleading gaze on Mike who gaped, then shook his head.

"No. No. No. No way. You're not getting a date with her."

"Mike, come on. Just get him the date," Lucas said annoyed.

"I'm not prostituting my sister!" Mike shouted back.

"But it's for a good cause."

"No, don't get him the date," said Dustin. "Know what? He's gonna spread his nasty-ass rash to your whole family."

"Acne isn't a rash and it isn't contagious, you prepubescent wastoid," Keith retaliated defensively.

"Oh, I'm a wastoid? She wouldn't want to go on a date with you, cause you make, like, what? Like \$2.50 an hour?"

"Nice perm," said Keith in an attempt to embarrass Dustin.

Dustin laughed. "Gonna make fun of my hair?"

Dustin and Keith kept on with their petty argument with Mike and Lucas watching in amusement. Will however became distracted as he noticed something strange occurring outside the arcade doors. He walked toward the entrance looking through the glass doors at the atmosphere outside. Thunder rumbled around the building and it appeared to be snowing.

"Hey. Hey, guys, do you see the-" he turned to ask his friends about the snow, but his sentence died in his throat when he saw that his friends were no longer there. In fact, he was all alone in the arcade. He peered around the games for a sign of anyone, but the building was deserted. Suddenly, the lights flickered off and the building became dark and cold. The game screens flickered with flashes of light and Will noticed dead vines covering nearly every surface in the arcade.

Will gasped at a deafening crash and he jumped around to see that the door to the arcade had opened of its own accord. Trembling from head to foot, his breath coming in pants, Will inched forward. Stepping out from the dead arcade, Will's terrified face stared up at the sky where billows of black clouds rolled over his head. The arcade sign spun and flickered. Thunder crashed and lightning split the sky, except the lightning was brightest red rather than blue, giving the sky an eerie, crimson appearance with each flash. Will watched in frozen terror feeling the presence of something...something...dark.

"Will!"

Will leapt in shock as he spun around to see Mike staring at him from beside the arcade entrance. The door closed behind Mike, shining and whole.

"Are you okay?" Mike asked.

Will glanced back at the sky only to see a cloudless night, several stars shining against the black backdrop. The arcade sign spun in place, the light steady and unblinking.

"Yeah, I just..." Will mumbled quietly as he backed away toward Mike, his eyes still scanning the sky for a single cloud or flash of red. "I needed some air."

"Come on. You're up on *Dig Dug*," Mike put his arm around Will's shoulder. "Let's take that top score back, huh?"

Together they re-entered the bustling arcade.

The next morning Main Street in Hawkins showed a town ready for the day. Bundles of newspapers were delivered to shops featuring a Halloween celebration. A jogger passed by festive window displays and early morning risers ambled down the sidewalks to work. The Hawkins' movie theater advertised the latest movie blockbuster, *The Terminator*, and Donald, the general store manager, swept the entrance of his shop clean from fallen leaves.

Outside of the police station a dark-haired, bearded man wearing glasses and a gray trench coat waited anxiously. The sheriff's truck pulled in the parking lot and Chief Jim Hopper climbed out of the cab, a cigarette between his lips.

"Good morning, Jim," the dark-haired man rushed to greet him. Hopper spared him one weary glance as he passed him without a word. "Jim. Huh, hold on a second. We need to talk."

"Get away from me," responded Hopper.

"Okay, no..." the man said, dismayed.

"Get away from me," Hopper said again.

"I really know you don't wanna hear this, Jim. Trust me."

He had to raise his voice to be heard over Hopper who replied in a sing-song voice, "Get away from me!"

"I only want five minutes!"

"Yeah, I want a date with Bo Derek. We all want things," piped Hopper as he entered the station.

Florence, the secretary, immediately waylaid him and snatched the cigarette from his mouth. He removed his jacket as the man continued relentlessly.

"This isn't a laughing matter, Jim. This is serious, okay? I really got something here I'm telling you."

Hopper groaned as he threw his jacket on the hat stand, and walked away.

"Hey, mornin' Chief," Officer Powell greeted cheerfully.

"Morning," Hopper muttered.

"Morning Murray," Powell glanced at the dark-haired man who had followed Hopper.

"Got any proof on your butt-probin' aliens yet, Murray?" Officer Callahan asked him. Powell laughed as Murray rolled his eyes.

Murray stepped aside as Florence shoved past him. She snatched the donut from Hopper's hand, of which he had just taken a bite. Hopper gave her a look of disgust when she replaced it with a bright green apple.

Murray went on, "I now believe there was, and may very well still be, a Russian spy presence in Hawkins."

His mouth full of donut, Hopper poured himself a mug of coffee as he repeated amused, "Russian spies!"

"Say Murray, are the Russian spies in cahoots with the aliens? Or how they fit in here? Cause I'm confused," chortled Callahan.

"I'm talking multiple reports now. Multiple reports, okay?" Murray replied. "Of a Russian child in Hawkins."

Hopper paused and glanced up at him. "A child? What are you talking about a child?"

"A girl who may have psionic abilities."

"Psionic?" repeated Powell, confused.

"Psychic," Murray clarified, annoyed.

"Hey, Chief what about that girl that made that kid pee himself?" Callahan asked.

"That was a prank," Hopper responded quickly.

"What girl?" Murray asked, his interest peaked.

"Wasn't a prank..." Callahan started but Hopper interrupted him with an agitated noise before planting himself before Murray.

"You got five minutes. Not a second more," he told him.

In his office, Hopper propped his legs up on his desk as Murray explained, "I talked to a *Big Buy* ex-employee who said some little girl shattered the door with her mind."

Hopper nodded. "I heard that story. Did you hear the one about the fat man with the beard who climbs down chimneys?"

Murray ignored him and continued as Hopper took a bite from his apple. "Then last month a co-worker of Ted Wheeler's claims some Russian girl with a shaved head was hiding in his basement. Ted now denies this."

Hopper pulled his feet off his desk and discarded the apple into the trash. Spitting the bite of apple from his mouth into his palm, he threw that away too, answering, "Oh wow. That's a surprise."

"But it connects."

"Enlighten me."

"This girl, she's some kind of a, of a Russian weapon, right?" Hopper

followed along as he placed a fresh cigarette into his mouth. "Barbara she sees this girl, tries to help her perhaps. But before she can, the Russians find them, take them-"

Hopper interrupted. "W-w-wait. You're telling me that Barbara Holland was kidnapped by Russian spies?"

"Kidnapped. Killed," confirmed Murray as Hopper used his lighter to light the cigarette.

"Killed?"

"Don't you get it, Jim?"

Hopper shook his head. "No."

"This has potentially international implications. I'm talking a full-on Russian invasion right here in Hawkins!"

A whirring sound followed Murray's dramatic exclamation. Hopper was spinning the dial on the side of his typewriter back and forth with a bored expression on his face.

"Do you have any proof of this girl? I mean, has anybody seen her like, recently?" Hopper inquired.

Murray turned desperate. "No! But these are separate-"

The phone rang and Hopper quickly reached for it, saying, "Oh. Excuse me. Sorry."

"Okay," Murray muttered, disgruntled.

"Hello?" said Hopper in the receiver.

"Merrill called, wants you to check out his pumpkins," Flo informed him. Hopper took a drag on his cigarette as he peered at Murray while listening to his secretary.

"All right," Murray gave a little nod, knowing full well that Hopper was not taking him seriously.

"Says they've been contaminated..." Flo was saying. "By his vengeful neighbor, Eugene. You're welcome."

Hopper hung up and snubbed out his cigarette in the ashtray on his desk. "God, I'm sorry. I really hate to do this, but I gotta run. It's an emergency."

"You gave me five minutes," Murray protested as Hopper retrieved his sheriff's hat from the hat stand by his door.

"Yeah, listen, you know what?" Hopper stood before Murray as he confronted him. "I liked your alien theory a lot better. And you want my advice? Why don't you stop bleeding those people dry and go home? All right?"

"Look, I am not bleeding anyone...dry."

His tone more threatening this time Hopper replied, "Listen to me. Go home."

Murray watched as Hopper left him standing in his office.

Steve Harrington sat in the driver's seat of his car beside Nancy in the parking lot of Hawkins High School. Currently, Nancy was busy looking over his college entrance essay. He waited impatiently, reading the worst in her expression.

"It's crap, I know," he said with bitter disappointment.

"Uh, no, it's not crap," she said unconvincingly and she continued reading with consternation.

Steve shook his head. "It's not good.

"It's going to be," she smiled at him encouragingly. "Just...it needs some reorganizing."

Steve groaned and Nancy gave him an apologetic look then asked, "Can I mark on it?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I guess."

Nancy pointed at one of his paragraphs as Steve leaned over to examine his work.

"So, in the first paragraph you used the basketball game versus Northern as a metaphor for your life, which is great," she told him earnestly.

Steve nodded. "Mm-hmm."

"But then, around here," she circled a spot in the second paragraph. "You start talking about your granddad's experiences in the war, and um, I-I-I don't see how they're connected."

"It connects because...because, you know, we both won," he answered as he struggled to remember the point he had been trying to make as he wrote the essay.

Nancy blinked and looked back at the essay trying to think of a kind way to tell Steve it just didn't work.

"Do you think I should start from scratch?" he asked doubtfully.

"No, I mean, I mean...when's the deadline?"

"It's tomorrow for early application. Can you come and help me tonight?"

Nancy shook her head. "No, we have our dinner tonight, remember?"

"Oh, my God!" Steve exclaimed exasperated when he remembered the gut-wrenching plans they had for the evening.

"We already canceled last week," she reminded him but looking up at his frustrated appearance she turned away and muttered, "You don't have to go. Just-just work on this."

"No. No. No. What's the point?" he said defeated and he snatched the essay from her and crumbled it up in his hands.

"Hey, calm down."

"I'm calm. I'm calm. I'm just being honest. You know. I mean...I'm just

gonna end up working for my dad anyway."

"That's not true."

"I don't know Nance," Steve shrugged. "Is that such a bad thing? There's insurance and benefits and all that adult stuff. And if I took it, you know, I could-could be around for your senior year."

"Steve..."

"Just to look after you a little bit. Make sure you don't forget about this pretty face," he said.

Nancy chuckled and glanced away but he stared down at her looking for any sign that she was pleased.

"Nance, I'm serious." She turned back to him and he leaned over, pressing a kiss to her lips. "I love you."

"I love you, too," she told him sweetly.

The rev of a loud engine broke the moment and they both snapped around to stare out the dash window. Climbing out of the car, they looked about the parking lot as they heard tires screeching on the pavement. A dark camaro with a California license plate sped into the lot, loud rock music blasting from within. Once parked the driver door opened and a young man their age stepped out of the car. He was of medium-build with a strong frame and tanned skin. He was clad in snug jeans and a denim jacket worn over a light gray t-shirt. His brown hair hung in wavy curls to his shoulders in mullet-form and he had a ring pierced through his left ear. A cigarette hung between his lips. On the other side of the car a young girl of about thirteen years climbed out from the passenger door. She too had tanned skin, but rather than brown hair hers was a vivid ginger. She clutched a skateboard and without a word or glance to the driver, she tossed it to the ground, wheels down, and stepping onto it skated her way over to the middle school building.

The driver watched her go, then turned, threw his cigarette to the ground, and walked off toward the high school.

Leaning against another car in the parking lot were three girls, one of

them being Carol, Tommy H.'s girlfriend. They watched as the stranger sauntered to the high school and one asked, "Who is that?"

"I have no idea," answered the third girl. "But would you check out that ass? Just look at it go."

She giggled and twirled her hair around her finger while Carol and the other girl stared appreciatively at his backside as he strolled away. Carol chewed her bubblegum absentmindedly, her interest peaked by the new attractive student Hawkins High School now had.

Will opened his locker to retrieve his morning class books, but paused when he noticed a folded paper sitting atop his notebooks. Someone must have slipped it through the vents of his locker. He pulled it out and opened it to find that it was a news clipping featuring the article titled "The Boy Who Came Back to Life". Over the article itself someone had written the word 'Zombieboy' and drawn x's over the eyes of his picture. He glanced up and down the hall, searching for whoever may have done it, but he noticed no one paying him any attention. The first bell rang so he crumbled the article in his hand and pulled out his books to head to class.

"Meet the human brain."

Displayed on Scott Clarke's desk before his class was a plastic model of a human brain. Dustin, Lucas, Mike and Will all peered at it in fascination, but most of the class wore bored expressions with glazed eyes.

Mr. Clarke continued, "I know. I know, it doesn't look like much. A little gross even, right? But consider this. There are a hundred billion cells inside of this miracle of evolution. All working as one."

A student with curly hair wordlessly passed a note to the student behind him after it was passed to him. Toward the back of the class a little girl played with a fortune teller folded up from a sheet of notebook paper. Another bored girl blew a large bubble out of her pink bubblegum.

"No, no, I did not misspeak," Mr. Scott continued nevertheless. "I did not stutter. A hundred billion."

The bubble popped over the girl's lips and suddenly a door closed. The students all looked over to see Principal Russell Coleman standing before them and a red-headed girl beside him.

"Ah, this must be our new student," Mr. Clarke said cheerfully.

"Indeed, it is. All yours," confirmed Principal Coleman. Dustin stared wide-eyed at the girl and Lucas sat up straighter as he took in her tanned, freckled face and red hair.

The girl walked past Mr. Clarke's desk making her way to the empty desk by the windows in the last row, but she halted as her teacher called out, "All right. Hold up, there. You don't get away that easy."

He pointed to a spot by his desk, indicating that he wanted her to stand there. "Come on up. Don't be shy."

The unsmiling girl rolled her eyes and backtracked to stand where he had suggested.

"Dustin, drum roll," said Mr. Clarke. Dustin closed his notebook, then tapped out a quick drum beat with his hands. With great enthusiasm, Mr. Clarke addressed his class. "Class, please welcome, all the way from sunny California, the latest passenger to join us on our curiosity voyage...Maxine."

He held out his arm to present her as Dustin finished his drum roll with a final thud on his notebook.

However, the girl shook her head and said, "It's Max."

"Sorry?" asked Mr. Clarke as Dustin's grin slipped off his face.

"Nobody calls me Maxine. It's Max," she clarified.

Lucas turned and whispered to Dustin, "Mad Max."

Mr. Clarke nodded. "Ah, well, all aboard, Max."

Having been introduced Max made her way over to the desk by the window. As she walked over Dustin, Lucas, Mike and Will followed her progress so that when she sat in her seat she looked up to see that all four boys were facing the back corner of the class staring at her.

Melvard's General Store sported a festive autumn display of pumpkins and haystacks in the window display as Joyce sat serenely at the checkout counter sowing a *Ghostbusters* logo patch onto her son's Halloween costume. The door to the shop's entrance opened, ringing the bell, and a stocky, graying middle-aged man entered. He picked up an orange pumpkin trick-or-treat bucket and greeted her.

"Hey there."

"Hey," Joyce replied, her face breaking out into a grin.

"Do you happen to have these in any other colors? I'm not a big fan of orange," he asked.

She frowned in contemplation as she set her sewing work on the counter. "Hmm...I'll have to check in back."

In the storage room at the back of the store Joyce was pressed up against a metal shelf with her arms wrapped around the man's shoulders as his lips moved passionately against hers. Her hands ran over the nape of his neck as she returned his kisses and he moved in closer to her causing her to slide back into the corner of the shelves. She reached out blindly to catch her balance and accidentally knocked an item to the floor.

"Oh, shit!" she giggled in exhilaration and bent to retrieve the item. "You're gonna get me fired."

"Well, that's my master plan," he responded. "Get you fired so I can hire you and we won't have to hide back here."

Joyce, who had put the box back onto the shelf, wrapped her arms around his neck again and kissed him with a moan of pleasure.

"Bob?" she began as he rained kisses down her neck. "Bob, I have to get back to work."

"I know, I'm sorry," he admitted. I just I can't stop thinking about you. It's crazy, I feel like a teenager."

"Me, too," she confessed.

"You know, in high school, you didn't know who I was," he chuckled.

Joyce gave him a little shake and muttered, "Come on."

Overcome with his longing for her he kissed her again and she laughed.

"Bob, I have to get back to work."

He dragged himself away from her, nodding. "Okay."

"You go sell your electronic thingamajiggies and I'll see you tonight for movie night."

"Jonathan's night to pick?"

Joyce nodded. "Yes."

"Okay."

He kissed her again then stalked off as she watched him go with a warm smile on her face. But, when he looked back at her, he could not help rushing back to kiss her one more time. She laughed out loud.

"Okay. Okay," he mumbled. He gave her a little wave and pulled himself away and walked to the door.

"Okay," repeated Joyce amused.

"Hey, look, a green one," Bob pointed at a green trick-or-treat pumpkin bucket to which she smiled at. Before leaving, he turned and said, "Tell Jonathan not to pick anything scary. I hate scary movies."

She gave him a little nod and he stalked off, closing the door behind him. Joyce smiled at the shelves around her feeling lighter than ever

before as if her joy would lift her into the air like a balloon.

Hopper drove down the long dirt lane to Merrill's farm passing a wooden sign with the painted message "Pick Your Own Pumpkins". Once he had met up with Merrill and listened to his complaint, Hopper allowed the farmer to walk him out into the field to take a look at his pumpkin patch.

"You're saying this was all fine yesterday?" Hopper asked doubtfully as he and Merrill walked through the field. He stared down at the rows of pumpkins, every one of which were black and rotting as if they had been sitting dead for months. A buzz of flies swarmed all around them, feasting on the remains.

"Fine? These were prize winners, Chief," Merrill said regretfully. "You should've seen 'em. For the life of me, I couldn't figure out what happened. And then I remembered...Eugene."

Hopper paused. "What about him?"

"He's been complaining about me to just about anyone who'll listen."

"Why's that?"

"Well, he started this 'Pick Your Pumpkin' thing. Acted like it was trademarked. I said, 'hire yourself a damn lawyer. See how far that gets you,'" Merrill replied boastfully.

"You're - you're telling me that nice old Eugene came out here after dark and doused your field with poison?" asked Hopper skeptically.

"Well, not Eugene himself. I'm thinking one of his field hands."

"Uh-huh." Hopper groaned internally.

"Listen, Chief. I don't go throwing around accusations lightly. You know me. But this happened the day before Halloween when sales are peaking? That's a hell of a coincidence," Merrill pointed out. Hopper pulled out his hunting knife as he listened and drawing out the blade he used it to peer inside the remains of one of the dead pumpkins. "Hell of a coincidence."

Hopper looked up, past Merrill. He pointed at the grain field behind the farmer and asked, "You got somebody working on that field?"

Merrill turned to gaze back at it. Moments later Hopper stepped into the field and peered through the tall stalks of grain. He heard a twig snap and turned his head to search for the source of the sound. He whipped his sunglasses from his face for better visibility and stored them in his pocket. Then, he pulled his gun out of its holster and slowly made his way through the field. He heard rustling and flies buzzing all around him, and his heart rate picked up its pace as he scanned for signs of movement. His heart gave a lurch when he spotted something tall and dark and for a split second he thought it was a monster from the Upside Down. However, recognition came and he realized it was nothing more than a scarecrow.

Suddenly, there was a loud screech right by his ear and spinning around he saw something black fly straight past him to land on the scarecrow's shoulder. Hopper yelled out in fright, raising his gun and aiming at the would-be attacker, but he found that it was only a black crow. It cawed at him from its perch on the scarecrow's shoulder and Hopper glared at the bird in agitation as he panted with adrenaline coursing through him.

"Yeah, screw you, too," he answered the bird as he shoved his gun back into its holster.

Standing in the hall beside the entrance of a classroom a girl handed out bright, orange flyers titled "Tina's Halloween Bash" to fellow classmates as they exited their classroom.

"Hey. Be there," she told a student. The next flyer she handed out went to Nancy. "Hey Nancy."

"Hey! Thanks," Nancy said as she read the flyer. Then, she turned back to Tina and asked, "Oh, could I get one more?"

"Yeah, sure." Tina quickly handed over another flyer.

Nancy took it and pretended to look at it in concentration before pushing it against Jonathan Byer's midriff as he walked silently

beside her.

"You're coming to this," she ordered with a smile.

"Come and get sheet-faced," he read. Smirking he told her, "No, I'm not."

"I c-I can't let you sit all alone Halloween. That's just not acceptable."

"Well, you can relax. I'm not gonna be alone. I'm going trick-or-treating with Will."

She flashed him a skeptical expression. "All night?"

"Yeah."

"No, no way. You're going to be home by eight, listening to the *Talking Heads* and reading Vonnegut or something," she predicted.

Jonathan shrugged. "Sounds like a nice night."

"Jonathan, j-just come. I mean, who knows, you might even, like, meet someone," Nancy muttered as she opened her locker. Suddenly, she felt herself lifted into the air and she shrieked loudly.

Steve set her down, laughing and she turned and hit him.

"Oh, my God!" she exclaimed breathlessly. "Take those stupid things off."

Steve removed his sunglasses. "I missed you."

"It's been like an hour."

"Tell me about it," agreed Steve and he kissed her passionately. Drawn into the moment she returned the kiss before pulling away.

"Okay. Okay, okay God," she chuckled.

"Sorry," he whispered.

Nancy turned back to her opened locker but looking down the hall she saw Jonathan walking away. She dragged her eyes from him

telling herself she did not care.

"There's no way that's Mad Max," said Mike.

"Yeah," agreed Will. "Girls don't play video games."

The boys were standing behind a fence watching closely as the red-haired Max skateboarded on the pavement several yards from them during recess.

"And even if they did, you can't get 750,000 points on *Dig Dug*," Mike maintained. "I mean that's impossible."

"But her name is Max," Lucas pointed out.

"So what?"

"So, how many Maxes do you know?"

Mike shrugged. "I don't know."

"Zero. That's how many."

"Yeah," pitched Dustin. "She shows up at school the day after someone with her same name breaks our top score. I mean, you kidding me?"

"Exactly," nodded Lucas. "So she's gotta be Mad Max. She's gotta be."

"And plus she skateboards so she's pretty awesome," grinned Dustin with finality.

"Awesome? You haven't even spoken a word to her," Mike frowned.

"I don't have to. I mean, look at her," he looked back at Max but she was nowhere to be seen. "Shit, I've lost the target."

The boys scanned the lot searching for her when Will piped out, "Oh! There."

He turned to his left and walked away from the fence watching as Max walked up the steps attached to the school. They stared after her

and when she had reached the top of the steps she threw something over the railing into the trash can on the pavement and headed inside the building. With a quick glance at each other the boys sped over, running past other students until they had reached the trash can. As Dustin dug through the trash looking for what she had thrown away, Lucas, Will and Mike, tried to look normal, waving innocently at other students who passed by while giving the four boys strange glances.

"I got it! There we go," exclaimed Dustin and he held up a crumpled sheet of notebook paper. He unfolded it as the boys leaned over his shoulder and they read it together.

"'Stop spying on me creeps'."

"Well, shit," Dustin commented. Mike grinned in amusement as they all stared blankly at the note.

"William Byers."

Will turned to see the principal standing behind them.

"You're mother's here."

Will's face fell and he said nothing. After making a stop by his locker Principal Coleman escorted Will to the school's entrance. As they walked down the hall students turned to stare at Will and he averted his eyes, feeling exposed, bared for all to see. When he had exited the building Joyce, who was waiting by the car, looked up and waved. He waved back, smiling and made his way to her.

"You guys think he's okay?" asked Dustin.

"He's always weird when he has to go in," answered Lucas. He, Mike and Dustin were standing at the corner of the brick building watching Will and his mother.

Mike shook his head. "I don't know. He's quiet today."

"He's always quiet," Lucas commented.

They watched as Principal Coleman closed the passenger door after

Will had climbed into his mom's car. And they watched as she drove away.

Will watched the trees flash past his window, not paying them any particular attention, as his mother drove down the road.

Looking over at her son Joyce asked, "You feeling any better? Will?"

Will jerked from his thoughts. "Huh? Uh, yeah. Yeah, sorry."

"Hey. What'd we talk about, huh?" she reminded him. "You gotta stop it with the sorries."

"Sorry," Will mumbled. "I mean I mean, yeah, I know."

"And listen, you know, th-there's nothing to be nervous about, you know," she told him. "Just-just tell 'em what you felt last night and what you saw. Hey, I'm gonna be there the whole time. So it's gonna be okay. Okay?"

She smiled at him.

"Okay," Will answered, unsmiling, as he turned to stare out the window again.

Joyce entered a parking lot and pulled her car up beside Hopper's truck, which he was leaning against while smoking a cigarette. He took a last dreg at the sight of Joyce's car then tossed it to the ground and turned to greet Joyce and Will as they climbed out of the car.

"Hey, buddy."

"Hey," said Will.

"Hey," Joyce offered wearily. Hopper let them pass and he followed them to the entrance of Hawkins National Laboratory.

Several minutes later, Will stepped up onto a scale wearing only his socks and a hospital gown. A nurse jotted down his weight then led him to an exam room where they tied a rubber band over his right bicep and, after sanitizing a spot over his vein, they drew a sample of

his blood. On his other arm they placed a blood pressure cuff and pumped it up so that it squeezed his arm uncomfortably and the nurse listened to his pulse as she released the pressure. Then, she quietly took a red pencil and drew dots onto his forehead and temples. A technician taped electrodes over the dots and connected them to a complex machine which began to print a read out of his brain activity. Throughout it all Will remained quiet and numb, no longer anxious over the now familiar procedures, but merely tired. Finally, Dr. Sam Owens entered the exam room wearing his white lab coat.

"Sir Will, how are ya? Mom. Hop," Owens greeted the three of them with a chipper attitude. "Let's take a look, see what's going on here."

He sat on a stool beside Will as he looked over Will's medical chart. "I see you shaved off a pound since we saw you last. Must be making room for all that Halloween candy."

Will gave a nonchalant shrug.

"What's your favorite candy? Desert island candy, if you had to pick one?"

Will shrugged again. "I don't know."

"Come on. Life or death situation what would you pick?" Owens pushed.

"Huh, I guess, huh..." he glanced at his mother beside him, who mouthed, "*Reese's Pieces*", and he told the doctor, "*Reese's Pieces*."

Owens nodded in approval. "Good call. Good call. I'm more of a *Mounds* guy, but I gotta say, peanut butter and chocolate, come on, hard to beat that."

He tossed Will's chart on the counter behind him then turned back to his patient. "All right, so tell me what's going on with you. Tell me about this episode you had."

"Well, my friends were there and then they just weren't," Will explained.

In a separate room Will and Dr. Owens could be heard speaking from a small security screen of which several agents were watching in silent concentration.

"...and I was back there again."

"In the Upside Down?" asked Owens.

Will nodded and the machine continued to print waves of activity from his brain.

"All right, so what happened next?"

Will stared at the ceiling as he remembered the events of the night before. "I heard this noise, and so I went outside, and it was worse."

"How was it worse?"

"There was this storm," he remembered vividly the crashing thunder and the red lightning.

"Okay..." Owens glanced up at the machine as the printing seemed to grow more erratic and he saw that the waves of activity were increased. "So how did you feel when you saw the storm?"

"I felt...frozen," Will replied, Joyce watching anxiously.

"Heart racing?" Owens guessed.

Will shook his head. "Just frozen."

"Frozen, cold frozen? Frozen to the touch?"

"No. Like how you feel when you're scared, and you can't breathe or talk or do anything," he described the feeling as someone who had experienced it many times. "I felt...felt this evil, like it was looking at me."

"It was evil? Well..." Owens cleared his throat. "What do you think the evil wanted?"

"To kill," Will said quietly. The printing of his brain waves was now

an alarming pace.

"To kill you?"

"Not me," Will said with a small shake of his head. He looked at Owens. "Everyone else."

Over half an hour later Will sat alone on a bench in the hall outside the offices, now wearing his normal clothes and working on a sketch.

Owens sat at his desk across from Joyce and Hopper with a blue stress ball gripped in his right hand. "All right, I'm gonna be honest with you. It's probably gonna get worse before it gets better."

"Worse?" Joyce repeated, concerned. "He's already had two episodes this month."

"He'll likely have more before the month is out," admitted Owens. "It's called the Anniversary Effect. And we've seen this with soldiers. The anniversary of an event brings back traumatic memories. Sort of opens up the neurological floodgates, so to speak."

He wiggled his fingers beside his head, indicating the brain.

"So what does this mean for the kid, huh?" inquired Hopper. "He's gonna have more episodes, nightmares?"

Owens nodded. "Yeah, that. Maybe some personality changes. He might get irritable. He might lash out."

"Wh-what do we do when that happens?" Joyce wanted to know.

"Okay. Well, from what we know about post-traumatic stress...and we're still learning, okay? Just treat him normally. Be patient with him. Don't pressure him to talk. Just let him lead the way."

"I'm sorry, what you're saying is it's gonna get worse and worse and we're just supposed to pretend like it's not happening?" Joyce asked incredulously.

"It sounds counterintuitive, I know. But I assure you that is really the best thing you can do for him," Owens maintained. Joyce glanced at

her lap doubtfully and Owens placed his stress ball onto the desktop. "Listen. I understand what you went through last year. I get it. But those people are gone. They're gone. Okay? So if we're gonna get through this, I just...I need you to realize I'm on your side. I need you to trust me."

Joyce shared a glance with Hopper remembering another scientist who had asked for their trust.

"Trust me'? Are you kidding me?" Joyce repeated bitterly to Hopper as they followed several paces behind Will to their vehicles in the parking lot.

"Yeah, I know. But, you know, university gives out a degree, this guys got it," Hopper said tiredly. "And look, that post-traumatic stuff he's talking about, that stuff is real. He's gonna be okay, all right? How's uh, Bob the brain?"

Joyce frowned at him. "Don't call him that."

"Sorry. Old habit."

"He's good. We're good," Joyce said confidently.

"Good. I'm happy for you. Really. Hey..." he stopped her as she opened her car door to climb inside and she peered up at him. "Things get worse, you call me first. You call me."

Joyce smiled and nodded as she tossed her cigarette to the ground. "Okay."

She got into the driver's seat then backed out of the parking space as Hopper walked around his truck. He pulled out a cigarette and lit it. As he took his first drag he looked up and spotted Dr. Owens watching him from a higher level outside the building. Owens waved at him, but Hopper simply glared back then turned and climbed into his truck.

A woman carrying several files in her arms sidled up to Owens and said, "They're ready for you, sir."

Owens nodded as he peered down at Hopper's truck. Then, he and

the woman re-entered the lab and soon they were stepping out from a large elevator in the dark sublevel hallway that lead to a heavy metal door. Owens pushed through and they entered a control room with window walls overlooking a large, spacious laboratory.

Owens passed a technician, giving her a pat on the shoulder. "Patty."

"Sam," she smiled.

A soldier in the process of putting on an aluminized heat radiation proximity suit looked up as Owens ambled over. "Afternoon, sir."

"Well, looks like another hot one today, huh?" Owens said in his chipper voice.

"Never gets old, sir."

A green light lit up on a panel and a set of sliding doors opened to allow the fully suited soldier to enter. He carried with him a four-pronged blowtorch attached to a tube connected with the fuel container which he carried in a protective casing on his back. The doors behind him closed and steam was released as the room was vacuum-sealed off. Then, the doors before him opened so that he could enter the isolated lab.

The soldier stepped forward into an atmosphere in which dead flakes floated in the air. He paced over to stand directly before the gate that led to the dimension now coined the Upside Down. The gate pulsed and glowed and Owens watched from the safety of the control room as the soldier powered the blowtorch and flames licked out at the vines of the gate. The vines jerked and shook violently, emitting a terrible screech.

From a safe distance several yards from the arcade entrance, Dustin and Lucas leaned over the hood of a parked car searching through the people coming and going for a glimpse of red-hair and tanned skin, Lucas doing so through a pair of binoculars.

"Still no sign?" asked Dustin.

"Jack shit."

Dustin groaned as he checked his watch. "Oh! Damn it. My mom's gonna murder me."

"So go home. I'll radio if she comes."

"Oh, yeah, nice try," Dustin replied. "You just want me outta here so you can make your move."

Lucas scoffed. "Oh cause you're such a threat."

Dustin grinned cockily. "That's right. She will not be able to resist these pearls."

He purred as he showed off his teeth. Lucas shook his head in disgust, then as Dustin looked toward the arcade he grabbed Lucas' arm and said excitedly, "Ten o'clock."

"What?" Lucas asked, confused.

"Ten o'clock!" Dustin pointed toward the arcade and realizing what he meant Lucas hurriedly peered through his binoculars to search for Max.

A sleek, midnight blue camaro sped into the lot outside of the arcade and screeched to a stop. The red-haired Max climbed out of the passenger door with a grumpy expression on her face. She turned around to face the driver inside the cab who was apparently yelling at her, though the boys could not make sense of what he was shouting or what she had shouted back.

"They're arguing. They're arguing," Lucas reported enthusiastically.

"Oh my God. I see that. I don't even know why you need those. God. You're so stupid," Dustin muttered in annoyance as he glared at Lucas spying through his binoculars.

He looked back up to watch as the driver began to speed away with the passenger door still open. Max slammed the door shut then held her middle finger high in the air for the driver to see if he looked in any of his mirrors. Finally, she ran into the arcade as Lucas and Dustin stared after her in bewilderment.

Inside the arcade music played over the speakers and Max played the game of *Dig Dug* with such zeal that she did not notice Lucas and Dustin watching her from a short distance away.

Lucas turned to Dustin. "She's incredible."

They both slid down to the floor behind the counter where they were hiding and Dustin said with a dazed look on his face, "She's..."

They glanced at one another and with huge smiles said together, "Mad Max."

A sprinkler watered the Wheeler's lawn as the family sat around the dinner table, though Nancy was absent as she was out to dinner with Steve.

"After dinner, I want you to pick out your toys for the yard sale," Karen told Mike who was poking at his food dispassionately.

"Fine," he mumbled.

"Two boxes' worth."

Mike's looked up at her in alarm. "Two boxes?"

"You heard me," she told him severely. Beside her mother Holly leaned her head back to put a long string of ham into her mouth.

"I'm fine with you giving away a couple, but the other ones just have way too much emotional value," complained Mike.

"Emotional value?" Karen asked with amused disbelief.

"Their hunks of plastic, Michael," inserted Ted.

"You already took away my Atari," Mike pointed out, ignoring his father.

"If you didn't want to lose more toys, you shouldn't have stolen from Nancy," Karen reasoned.

"I didn't steal. I borrowed."

"Oh, and you didn't curse out Mr. Kowalski last week either, right? Or plagiarize that essay? Or graffiti the bathroom stall?"

Mike rolled his eyes. "Everyone graffiti's the bathroom stall."

"So if your friend jumps off a cliff, you're gonna jump, too?" Ted inquired of him.

Mike closed his eyes wishing with all his might that he could yell back that he had already jumped off a cliff for his friend.

"Look we know you've had a hard year, Michael," Karen said gently. "But we've been patient. This isn't strike one. This isn't even strike three."

"It's strike twenty," Ted interjected. "You're on the bench, son. And if it'd been my coach, you'd be lucky to still be on the team."

Ted went back to cutting his ham and missed his son's confused frown.

What was he about to be disowned? Mike wondered sarcastically.

"Two boxes," Karen reiterated. "Two."

Mike stabbed moodily at his meat in retaliation.

Walking up the walkway to a one story home Nancy and Steve noticed a 'For Sale' sign posted in the yard.

"Okay. Ready?" Steve asked as they stood before the front door.

"Yeah," she answered feeling queasy.

Steve sighed. "Okay."

He rang the bell.

In the living room of the neat home a side table was filled with framed photos of Barbara Holland through the years, from a smiling

little girl to a bright-eyed, red-haired teen.

"I'm so sorry I didn't get to cook," Mrs. Holland told Steve and Nancy as they sat around the dining table, which was spread with cardboard containers of chicken, mashed potatoes and biscuits from KFC. "I was gonna make that baked ziti you guys like so much, but I just forgot about the time and then before you know it, 'Oh my God, it's five o'clock.'"

Nancy shook her head and smiled. "It's fine. It's great."

"Right. I love KFC," nodded Steve.

Nancy hesitated then said, "So I noticed a 'For Sale' sign out in your yard. I-is that the neighbor's or...?"

Mrs. Holland looked to her husband, asking, "You wanna tell them?"

He gestured with his fork. "Go ahead."

With a smile she turned back to Nancy and Steve saying, "We hired a man named Murray Bauman. Have either of you heard of him?"

Nancy shook her head slowly as she looked at Steve. "No."

"No, I don't think so," Steve shook his head as well feeling clueless.

"He was an investigative journalist for the *Chicago Sun-Times*," she informed them.

"Pretty well-known," added Mr. Holland as he held out a business card with a picture of a bearded man in glasses to Steve.

Steve peered at it curiously as Marsha explained excitedly, "Anyway, he's freelance now, and he agreed to take the case."

"Oh that's...that's great," Steve said as he passed the card to Nancy. "No, that's really...that's great, right?"

He peered down at Nancy feeling unsure of what else he could say and hoping she would take over.

"Um, what exactly does that mean?" Nancy asked unsure.

"Means he's gonna do what that lazy son of bitch Jim Hop-" Mr. Holland began, but his wife shushed him and after a pause he said, "Sorry."

He took a deep breath then released it. In a far more calm voice he continued, "What the Hawkins' police haven't been capable of doing. Means we have a real detective on the case."

"It means..." Mrs. Holland added in a quivering voice. "We're going to find our Barb."

"If anyone can find her, it's this man," Mr. Holland said and his wife nodded. Nancy sat back in her seat uncomfortably, staring down into her lap. "He already has leads. By God, he's worth every last penny."

Nancy looked up in concern. "Is that why you're selling the house?"

"Oh, don't worry about us sweetie. We're fine," Mrs. Holland assured her. "More than fine. For the first time in a long time, we're hopeful."

She smiled happily, but Nancy peered back down at her plate feeling a wave of emotion bearing down on her. She did not know if she would cry or scream but she knew she could no longer sit there quietly.

In a stammering voice she said, "Excuse me. I'll be right back."

She rushed off and Steve watched her leave unsure what to do. Glancing back at the Hollands he picked up his chicken thigh and took a large bite.

"It's finger lickin' good," he commented.

"Mmm," Mr. Holland murmured in agreement as he and his wife nodded and smiled.

In the Holland's bathroom, Nancy leaned over the sink trying to steady her heavy breathing. She looked up into the mirror at her reflection, her eyes smarting and she noticed a picture frame in the corner of the mirror. In the framed picture was a photo of Barb.

Looking to her left she stared down at her smiling friend on the counter, but it hurt to see that beautiful face so she turned the frame down. Then, she sat on the edge of the bathtub trying to master her emotions. Yet, the more she thought about Barb, and what had happened to her, and the fact that her parents were still clinging to the hope that she was out there alive somewhere, waiting to be found, her vain struggle to overcome her grief crumbled and she buried her face in her hands sobbing.

In his basement, Mike gave each of his toys a sulky glance as he tossed them into a cardboard box which his mother had labeled 'Yard Sale'. After discarding a stuffed monkey into the box he picked up his Tyrannosaurus Rex named Rory. He pressed its button and it let out a screechy roar. Setting Rory to the side he leaned down and picked up his model of the *Millenium Falcon* that sat on the floor by his feet and he remembered Dustin's attempt to see it fly via Eleven's powers.

And just like that his thoughts were once again consumed by El. He turned and stared over at the tent he had put together for her the year before. He hesitated, but then he set the Falcon down and strolled over to the tent. He sat on the blankets and picked up his radio. Raising the antenna and pressing the transmitter button he called out to her.

"El, are you there? El?" Static answered. "It's me. It's Mike. It's day 352, seven forty p.m. I'm-I'm still here. If you're out there, say something. Or give me a sign. I won't even - I won't even say anything. Just...I wanna know if you're okay."

He released the transmitter again, but again he only heard static. With a sigh, he shoved the antenna down, muttering, "I'm so stupid."

He dropped the radio on the blankets and stood up from the tent. As he stalked away however, the static crackled over the radio again and a quiet, distorted voice said his name over the radio. He gasped and ran back snatching up the device just as his name rang out again.

"Hello, is that you?" Mike transmitted excitedly, his heart pounding.

"Yeah, it's me, Dustin. What're you doing on this channel again? I've

been trying to reach you all day. We were right. Max is Mad Max," Dustin announced excitedly as he road his bike home from beside Lucas.

Feeling incredibly disappointed Mike grunted, "Yeah, I'm busy."

He shoved the antenna down once more cutting off Dustin's next transmission. He stared mindlessly at nothing in particular feeling angry and hurt, because for one small second he had thought El was back. It was like losing her all over again.

"What do we do now?" Lucas asked.

"We stick to the plan," Dustin replied.

"Mike's not gonna like it."

"Last time I checked, our party is not a dictatorship. It's a democracy," Dustin said somewhat grumpily.

"What if Max says no?" Lucas fretted.

"How can Max say no to these?" Dustin smiled and purred again.

"I told you stop that," Lucas chuckled.

"I'll see you tomorrow," Dustin called as he swerved up a lawn to his right.

"Later."

Reaching the front of his house Dustin climbed off his bike and leaned it on it's kickstand. He was headed for the front door when he suddenly heard a chirping sound. He turned searching for the source. Thinking it might be their cat he called out.

"Mews!" He made a kissing noise, but no cat appeared and after a moment, when the chirping did not sound again, he turned back toward his house thinking it was a bird or some other animal. Not until he had entered the house and closed the door did the trash can by the garage shake as something moved from within.

Joyce looked up from the popcorn she was making on her stovetop to see a camera aimed at her.

"Stop. Stop," she said with an awkward smile.

"What?" Bob asked innocently. "Come on, you gotta get used to it. This is the future."

"Well, put the future down and get me a clean bowl," she told him waving the camera away. Bob lowered the video recorder and turned on the spot wondering where he might find a bowl.

In his bedroom, Will worked hard on a drawing he had started earlier in the day at the lab. In it were dead trees and a grotesque character with a bowl haircut like his. He had written the name 'Zombie Boy' on the page. There was a knock on the door and he looked up to see Jonathan enter.

"Hey, bud. I uh, didn't know what you'd like, so I got a variety," said his older brother, holding up three VCR tapes which he then placed on Will's dresser. "Take your pick."

"Whatever you want," Will shrugged in annoyance returning his attention back to his drawing.

Jonathan paused, then said, "All right."

Figuring that Will would open up about what was on his mind when he was ready, Jonathan sat on the bed beside him and glanced at the sketch he was coloring.

"What are you working on?" Will did not respond, so he looked over the top of the notebook and read out, "'Zombie Boy'? Who's Zombie Boy?"

Will's eyes danced up staring at nothing in particular before he looked back to his drawing.

"Me," he replied.

"Did someone call you that?" Jonathan asked, frowning in concern.

When Will did not answer he said, "Hey. You can talk to me. You know that, right? Whatever happened. Will, come on, talk to me."

"Stop treating me like that," Will snapped.

"What? Like what?"

"Like everyone else does. Like there's something wrong with me."

"What are you talking about?"

"Mom, Dustin, Lucas. Everyone," Will spouted in frustration. "They all treat me like I'm gonna break. Like I'm a baby. Like I can't handle things on my own. It doesn't help. It just makes me feel like more of a freak."

"You're not a freak," Jonathan said quickly.

"Yeah, I am. I am," Will told him forcefully.

He returned to his drawing as Jonathan looked to the floor in thought. It was obvious this had been building up in Will. That he had been feeling like this for months, maybe all year, since coming back from that dreadful place. No one would want to be treated like they were somehow incapable, especially someone who had managed to survive an entire week in the Upside Down while being hunted by a man-eating monster. To Jonathan, Will was braver and stronger than anyone he had ever known.

"You know what? You're right," Jonathan pushed himself up onto the bed, crossing his legs into a pretzel as he sat facing his brother. He told him sharply, "You are a freak."

"What?" Will peered up in surprise. He had not expected Jonathan to agree with him.

"No, I'm serious. You're a freak. But what? Do you wanna be normal? Do you wanna be just like everyone else? Being a freak is the best, all right. I'm a freak."

"Is that why you don't have any friends?"

"I-I-I have friends, Will," stuttered Jonathan, suddenly feeling attacked.

"Then why are you always hanging out with me?"

Jonathan thought for a moment. "Because you're my best friend, all right? And I would rather be best friends with Zombie Boy than with a boring nobody. You know what I mean? Okay, look...who would you rather be friends with? Bowie or Kenny Rogers?"

Will pulled a face. "Ugh."

"Exactly. It's no contest. The thing is, nobody normal ever accomplished anything meaningful in this world. You got it?"

"Well..." reasoned Will thoughtfully. "Some people like Kenny Rogers."

"Kenny Rogers. I love Kenny Rogers," said Bob popping out of nowhere outside Will's door. He chuckled then noticed Will and Jonathan's smirks as they glanced at one another. "What's so funny?"

"Nothing," said Will.

Bob noticed the tapes on Will's dresser and picking them up he read the title of the top one.

"Mr. Mom," he whooped excitedly. "Perfect!"

As he left the brothers broke down laughing.

On the television screen, a man wearing a plaid apron, cleaning gloves, and goggles tossed a soiled diaper into a garbage bag via a pair of tongs. He turned to the children on the screen.

"Where's Mommy keep the extra diapers?"

Bob and Joyce laughed at the comedy as Jonathan yawned in boredom. Will ate his popcorn feeling content.

"Hey!" the movie character called after the kids. "Cowards."

Again, Bob and Joyce laughed in amusement, and Joyce glanced lovingly at Bob beside her enjoying his presence more than the movie. Suddenly, the phone rang and she jerked around in alarm.

"Hey. It's okay. Let it go," Bob told her gently. "Probably just a crank call."

Joyce nodded, though the phone still rang.

"Okay," she whispered.

"Let it go," he said, holding her hand. He faced the screen again and he burst out in laughter at the debacle the character was dealing with.

However, Joyce could no longer enjoy the film as she tried to force the ringing from her mind as well as the way it made her feel so powerless.

A technician sat alone in his seat in the sublevel control room of Hawkins' Lab. He wore headphones over his ears and was listening to loud music as he tossed a ball at the wall. It hit the wall with a thud and bounced back at him. He caught it and repeated the activity. Lost in his music and his game, he did not immediately notice the lights begin to flash and the machines beeping. Before long however, an alarm blared loudly so that the technician heard the noise over his music and he turned to find the monitors going haywire, his ball dropping to the floor when he did not catch it. He removed his headphones and stared in fear and confusion.

Late that night, the Byers' home was quiet with everyone having gone to bed. The lights remained on throughout the house, something they had been doing all year. It was a comforting thought that the lights would warn them if anything came near. The kitchen faucet had also developed a leak, and the clock's dial turned ticking away the seconds, but these were all normal sounds to Will who took no notice as he walked out of his bedroom to go to the bathroom.

After relieving himself he turned the sink on and began to wash his

hands. However, a new noise sounded over the small home and he shut off the sink as he froze to listen. Opening the bathroom door, the sound grew louder and he realized it was thunder, but he knew there had been no storm in the forecast. He inched toward the front door and as he did so he saw flashes of red through the tinted window.

Then, the door slowly creaked open of its own accord, revealing a terrible storm outside. Thunder crashed and lightning flashed red over black clouds. Wind blew dead leaves across the frozen ground and Will stood and watched in horror. A feeling washed over him causing the hair on his neck and arms to stand on end. A feeling that something was staring straight back at him. Something so horribly evil it was unmatched in this world.

Despite his fear he was compelled to walk outside and he did so mindlessly. Stepping out onto the porch he found himself back in the Upside Down, his house shrouded in hideous vines and the red lightning racing across the black sky like some grisly light show. But as he stared up into that vast storm he saw the form of a large, shadowed and tentacled being. Then, very distinctly the domed head turned in his direction and Will's eyes widened in terror.

Deep in the woods, Hopper drove his truck through a clearing. Coming to a stop he shut the truck off and grabbed a flashlight to use while trekking through the woods. After a few minutes he reached a spot where, when he aimed his flashlight's beam on it, he could see a thin wire stretched low between the trees about a foot from the ground meant to keep intruders away. He carefully stepped over the wire then continued on to the cabin straight ahead, where a dim light glowed from within.

He made his way up the old steps, opened the screen door and tapped out a rhythmic knock on the wooden door. From within the door's latch was unlocked and he let himself in. A small television played a tune on the floor and he switched it off as he looked around, but he saw no one. He strolled into the kitchen removing his belt and gun plus holster, setting them onto the kitchen counter. He opened the fridge and pulled out a beer, then paced over to the small dining table where he found a plate of waffles half-eaten on the surface.

"Hey, what'd we talk about?" he called.

"No signal," answered a sulky voice.

"What?" he asked, confused as he sat at the table.

"No signal. It's eight-one-five. You're late," the voice told him angrily. A door opened and Hopper looked down at his covered dinner plate uncomfortably.

"Yeah, I lost track of time. I'll signal next time, all right?" He explained. "Uh, and it's uh, it's eight fifteen, it's not eight-one-five."

His voice turned to a normal talking volume as Eleven joined him across the table. Her hair had grown out from her buzzed cut into dark curls over her ears and she wore a light gray sweatshirt under a pair of denim overalls.

"Eight fifteen," she repeated carefully.

"Now, what'd we talk about?" Hopper asked again as he rolled up the sleeves to his uniform shift. "Dinner first, then dessert. Always. That's a rule. Yeah?"

He leaned down as he addressed her, staring directly into her eyes. Eleven nodded.

"Yes."

Satisfied, Hopper turned his attention to his dinner and El followed suit. She removed the aluminum foil from the plate and passed it to Hopper who took it and his and threw them into the trash behind him. As he ate his food he watched her eat, feeling glad to be back home.